

THE WOMEN OF WESTBRIDGE.

Westbridge is a thriving New England town. Until six months ago it was also a conservative town.

But six months ago certain events took place which affected materially both the conceit and the customs of this conservative town.

On the morning of the eventful day Richard Downing, of the firm of Downing, Broad & Co., brokers, was half awake. It was nine o'clock, and he was due at his office at eight thirty. He was blissfully unconscious of the hour. The extra sleep had put him in good humor. He stretched out his arms, yawning, and thinking lazily that for once his wife would not have to call him. He was awake, that is, almost—he would be soon—as soon as he had finished his coffee. No, this was too childish! He would wake up—

Keeping his eyes open might help. He opened them once more to their widest extent. The first object they rested on, put him wide awake. It was a new broadcloth gown, dark red, with rich satin trimmings.

Downing eyed it approvingly. "Awfully swell taste, Mary has. Won't she look stunning in it! Pretty Bill with it, I'll warrant. Just home from the dressmaker's evidently."

His eyes wandered lazily to the little clock on the mantel. Then something suspiciously like an oath was thrown back with the bedclothes.

"What could Mary be thinking of?" He cast a wild glance about the room. He rushed to the door and called down the stairway.

There was no reply. His voice came back with a suggestion of emptiness from the rooms below. He looked about the chamber, perplexed, exasperated.

"Where can my trousers be?" he muttered.

His eyes caught a slip of paper on the pillow. He would not own the start that he gave, nor the hand that seemed to clutch at his throat as he tore open the paper.

"Dear Richard: I cannot endure our present way of life—"

Yes, it had come. As he read, a dozen thoughts were coursing through his brain. This was what Dick Crawford's wife did. He remembered the look on Dick's face the next day. He groaned and hurried on:

"The only way out of it that I can see is for you to change places with me for a day. Perhaps then you will know how I feel about living such a cramped, shut-in, buried-alive life. I am sure you will, Richard; you are so sensible in most things, and a dear husband. You cannot really understand my misery unless you have to wear the same kind of clothes. So I have had a nice gown and shoes and other things made for you. I hope you will like the gown, dear. I picked it out myself. The day will not seem long, darling, for I shall be coming back to you at night. Your Affectionate Wife and Protector.

"P. S.—Don't worry about the office. I will attend to everything."

He sat, half dazed, trying to take it in. His mind ran back, catching up the phrases in the note, fitting them into the past. "I picked it out myself, dear." He often picked out Mary's dresses. It was only last week, he recalled, that they had differed—almost quarreled about her dress. She had wanted to have a different style—some "hifalutin" aesthetic make. He had set his foot down pretty promptly on that. His wife was not going to make a frump of herself for any "common sense" foolishness. All well enough for a man who has the hard work of the world to do. But a lady should be elegantly clad. He glanced at the gown with its velvet collar and embossed

text.

His heart gave a leap—and stood still. The office! He must be there, and inside of ten minutes. That famous deal was to be made today. It meant a clear five thousand. It would be a costly joke for Mary if he missed that!

He sped up the attic in search of a last year's suit. The rafters were swept "as bare as your hand" of all masculine attire. Only gowns and petticoats hung in mocking, unified folds before him. He turned and fled back to the closet—not so much as a necktie to reward his search!

Then first the enormity of the joke came over him! He was a prisoner in his own house! It was like being smothered—buried alive. He raged across the room. He stormed. He glared at it. He shook it fiercely. It may be well to close the door.

When it opened again a tall, well formed woman, dressed in a broadcloth gown, swept out across the threshold, and tripped lightly down the stairs. On the bureau lay a soft pile of curly, blonde hair. It was Richard Downing's moustache. Behind the bureau lay one mangled, discarded article of attire—a stiff, unyielding corset.

A cheerful fire was burning in the dining-room grate. The table was bright with linen and silver. Only one place was laid—behind the coffee-urn. Downing glanced at it. He started and frowned, and attempted to run his hands into his trousers' pockets. They slid ineffectually down the smooth cloth. He crossed them behind him and stared gloomily into the fire.

The sombre look lightened; the servants—they were in the house, of course. He seated himself behind the coffee-urn, and rang the bell sharply. Thank fortune! the morning paper was there, and it was big. He buried himself behind it, and listened eagerly to the step that entered the room. Ah! it was James—a great relief. It would have been awkward to have one of those giggling maids come in.

"James!" from behind the paper.

"Yes, sir."

Something in the tone—guarded, non-committal and deprecating—caused Downing to peep around the corner of the paper. What he saw caused him to retire more quickly than he had emerged. James, the tall, the dignified, the imperturbable, stood there expressionless, in a spotless dimly gown, a muslin cap topping his solemn countenance.

"James!" Downing's voice was sharp, with a barely perceptible quiver in it, "what is the meaning of this nonsense?"

There was no answer. A dimly arm carefully arranged the egg cup and prepared cream and sugar for his coffee. Downing sipped the coffee cautiously. How was he to eat any breakfast with that Punch-and-Judy show standing behind him! He could feel it through the back of his head—arms folded, solemn gaze straight ahead, cap, by this time, slightly awry.

Whatever sense of humor Mary might have indulged in arraying her butler, she had communicated none of it to James. To him the affair was serious. Downing was driven to meet it with like seriousness.

"James," he said sternly.

"Yessir."

"Go down to Cole & Thompson's and bring me a complete suit of clothes—everything from the ground up. Hurry, now."

Downing breathed a sigh of relief. Really it was absurd—he was getting hysterically nervous. The combination of James and solitary confinement was too much for anyone. Mary must have lain awake nights to think up anything so preposterous. She should suffer for this. No, he would let her off easy. She should be a good deal more surprised to see him walk in, Downing chuckled.

He began to eat with a relish.

James' step sounded outside the door. The handle turned. Downing looked up with a pleased smile. It turned to wrath.

In the doorway, starched and immaculate, stood James, a plate of steaming muffins in his hand.

Downing glared. He seized the wooden James, shook him until cap, apron and dimly sleeves stood in three separate directions.

Before he could recover breath his victim had retreated behind the heavy oak door. The conversation that followed was carried on through a cautious crack, at which appeared now one wary eye, now a crumpled cap, and now a degenerate ear.

"James, what does this mean?"

"Missus told me to."

"To what?"

"Keep an eye on you, sir."

"Well, you'd better come inside where you can keep two." There was deep sarcasm in the tone.

"No, thank you, sir," respectfully.

"James"—after an eloquent pause—"if a fiver would be of any use to you—"

"No, sir; missus said you'd try it."

"Try what?"

"To bribe me, sir."

"Did she, perhaps, tell you why I am caged up here like a lunatic?" sarcastically.

The watching eye gleamed intelligently through the crack, and one long bony finger appeared under the rakish cap and tapped significantly on the expanse of forehead.

"Oh!" Downing gasped. He sank back speechless. So that was it? Mary had told James that he was out of his head, had she? And she had shut him up? For what? Perhaps he was insane. He laughed aloud. The eye disappeared hastily from the crack.

"See here, James, you are all right. You do what your mistress told you to—only clear out of my sight and hearing. And shut the door. I'll be quiet."

Downing smiled grimly. Mary had chosen a good tool. She knew, by bitter experience, the thickness of James' skull, and that if an idea were once lodged there another could not possibly enter. If she had told James that his master was insane and must be humbled—even to dressing up like an imbecile wax doll—nothing could drive the idea out of his head.

"And my actions have not been altogether sane," reflected Downing candidly.

There was a sliding click of the latch and the sound of scurrying feet.

Downing did not at once avail himself of his liberty. He sat looking moodily into the fire, pondering on the situation. What could Mary mean by it? She was a sensible woman—ugh! What was the matter? He felt sick, and compressed, and choking. Why would women have their dresses made so tight? He pulled impatiently at the offending buttons, already stretched to the last degree of tension. At a touch they popped merrily across the room. Downing drew a deep, full breath. With the inspiration came a wave of brain memory. He had always insisted on Mary's wearing shapely, tailor-made gowns. He had pooh-poohed the short waisted, aesthetic ones for which she sighed. "Bags," he had called them, he remembered penitently, as he crawled around the floor after escaping buttons.

When the ravages of digestion had been repaired as skillfully as masculine fingers could accomplish, he then prowled about the house, a restless spirit. He could not sit still; but neither, after a time, could he move about with any comfort. The eternal swish-swish, twist-twist of the heavy skirts about his ankles drove him wild.

He limped at last to a couch, and, throwing himself down, lay staring miserably at the ceiling. His head

ached. His back ached. No wonder women were sick! He would be a confirmed invalid before night.

He had not ventured to peep out of the windows. Someone might see him. But at last, about three o'clock in the afternoon, he limped miserably to the front window and looked up and down the quiet street. Not a soul in sight. How good the sunshine looked, and the dusty pavement.

He raised his languid eyes to the window across the street. What a very peculiar looking woman! Her profile was strong and fine, but there was something awkward in her bearing—Jenkins!

As Downing doubled up with laughter, he became aware of a similar mirth on the part of Jenkins. He bethought himself of his own unmanly garments, and beat a hasty retreat.

Jenkins did the same.

The curtains fell chastely between them.

The temptation was too strong to be resisted. Cautiously, after a time, Downing raised a corner of the curtain and peered out.

Jenkins was doing the same.

They grinned. Communications began—signs, deaf-and-dumb letters, and gesture.

"What is it all about?" telegraphed Jenkins. "Morton, next door, in same fix."

Morton appeared and grinned.

Presently no less than five gowned men discovered themselves, peeping from behind sheltering curtains. The whole street was in a state of petti-coat siege.

Downing's mind leaped farther. It was probably the whole town. The men of Westbridge were to be taught a lesson.

Swiftly Downing telegraphed to Jenkins. They would keep quiet until evening. They would not expose themselves to the ridicule of the day. But when the friendly shades of night should fall—indicated by closing his eyes and falling into exaggerated sleep—they would steal forth and confer.

Once more the curtains fell, and Downing crawled miserably back to the couch to await Mary's return. The stillness and loneliness of the house were unbearable. Was it thus, he wondered, that she waited for him to come at night? Even the wooden James, who had become invisible, would have been welcome. At times Downing heard a swish of starch or a ruffled scuttle that told him he was still under guard.

There was a quick key in the door, a hurried step in the hall, a snatch of song. The portieres parted.

Downing lay on his side, one arm protecting his face. He watched her from beneath it.

She came swiftly down the room. Tired, dear? She dropped gracefully to one knee beside him, and smoothed his hot forehead with firm, soft fingers.

The long curtains parted. James, in dimity and cap, appeared. "Dinner is served, sir."

"Come, dear," said Mary, gently. "You will feel better when you have had something to eat."

Downing made a mental vow never to say it again. It was one of his pet phrases.

As they seated themselves, he saw with envious eyes the evening paper, his paper, laid carefully by Mary's plate. He must play the role to the bitter end. He would ask her meekly what had been done today.

But with the first spoonful of soup she disappeared behind the paper.

Downing studied the lines upside down.

He was remembering many things. Occasionally, as he sipped his soup he caught a glimpse of Mary's face around the corner of the paper. He had no idea that she could look so superior. Those gold-bowed spectacles were immensely becoming to her. He had never let her wear glasses. He liked her pretty, feminine, short-sighted way of looking at things. The glasses spoiled all that. But they suited her present role awfully well. They somehow made her look like young Barclay at the club. Downing had always stood secretly in awe of Barclay and of his opinions. As he looked at his wife he was conscious that she affected him very much after the manner of young Barclay. He tried to rise above it; but a miserable consciousness of soft silk about his wrists and costly lace at his throat kept him down.

Now and then Mary vouchsafed him a piece of news. She murmured to herself over specially interesting items. With the coming of dessert, she laid down the paper with an air of conscious virtue that Downing recognized acutely.

The gold eye-glasses surveyed him kindly, if a trifle patronizingly.

"What was done about the 'Big Four,' Mary?" The question that had been burning on his lips had leaped out.

"Oh, that is all right. I made ten thousand." She spoke with modest satisfaction.

Downing gasped inwardly. Five had been his maximum hope.

"Was Dexter there?"

"He wasn't able to come." Mary smiled ever so slightly and kindly.

"Mrs. Dexter took his place?"

"How was the deal managed?"

"I don't believe you would understand it, dear." She spoke firmly, but very, very kindly. "But you really get the cream of it all." She extracted a bill from a generous roll and tossed it across the table. "I thought I would draw a little on account," she said.

Downing pocketed it—that is, tried to pocket it—humbly. Good money was not to be refused. But deep in his heart was a resolve never to toss money to Mary again. It was not comfortable. She should have an allowance and a bank account after this—if there was any "after this." He began to feel as if the satin folds and

lace might be grown to his person. As soon as James should leave them alone together he would tell Mary what he had been thinking about today.

James passed the dessert, filled the glasses, gave a final glance to see that nothing more was needed, and grasped the handles of his tray.

"Have you had a comfortable day, James?" asked Mary kindly. She did not trust herself to look at him.

James released his hold on the tray and lifted the dimity skirt in one hand, gazing at its stiffer. "It's the like o' that wud be the death of a man if he was a wumman," he said solemnly.

Mary looked at him reflectively.

"They aren't comfortable, are they, James? How do you think you would like to wear them all the time?" she asked, scanning the wooden face.

"Dade an' I'd niver be doin' it another day—not if ye was to go down on yer knees for it," returned James, promptly.

He grasped the handles of the tray once more and rustled away with solemn mien.

As the door closed behind him, Downing glanced at Mary. Their eyes met. They smiled.

"Make out your list, Mary," said Downing, lumbly. "You shall have the things tomorrow. In the main I agree with James."

In the main every man in West-bridges agrees with James. For which reason the women of Westbridge are today comfortably clad. Some of the woman continue frumps under the new regime as they would under the old. But they are comfortable frumps.

Westbridge comes near to being the "Little Nut inside the Hub." But the men of Westbridge are less boastful than of old. They walk softly before the world—Jennette Lee, in the New York Evening Post.

TIME OF LINCOLN'S DEATH.

It was announced a few days after the death of President McKinley that a movement was on foot to induce jewelers throughout the country to have recorded on the pointed clocks which serve as advertisements for the craft, the time at which President McKinley was shot by Czolgosz, five minutes before four. At present these clocks record the hour and minute of Abraham Lincoln's death. However, that was many years ago, and today comparatively few people know that the hands on jewelers' dummy clocks point to 8:18, because that was the time when the nation's first martyred executive breathed his last.

As history records that Lincoln died at 7:22 in the morning, says The Keystone, it is evident that the dummy clock with hands at 8:18 does not tell "the time when the nation's first martyred executive breathed his last."

What seems to be the truth in the matter was well told some time ago by a member of the jewelry firm of Benedict Bros. of New York. It seems that dummy clocks or watches indicate 8 o'clock and eighteen and one-half minutes because that is the position on the dial where time can be shown, the hands being on opposite sides and making a perfect angle, and also being equally distant by minute marks or degrees from the figure 8, taking that as a starting point. There is but one other place on the dial where the time would be correct and show the hands equally distant from the figure 12; that is at 15 3/4 minutes past 9 o'clock, or, with the hour and minute hands reversed; but this would not be so desirable, as the hands would be almost directly at right angles across the face of the dial. It must be remembered that while the minute hand makes the circuit of the dial of 60-minute degrees, the hour hand moves but five minute degrees; therefore, the movement of the hour hand one minute degree necessitates the movement of the minute hand 12 minutes, or one-fifth of the whole. There is in existence an old dummy sign watch, used by the late Samuel W. Benedict in the early part of the present century, manufactured long before the death of Lincoln, which indicates exactly 8:18 1/2 o'clock.

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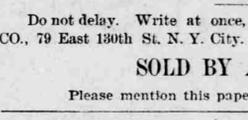
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